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Hélène Couprie

► **To cite this version:**

Hélène Couprie. Comment – Did the COVID-19 Crisis Contribute to a Change in the Gender-Based Division of Work within Families?. *Economie et Statistique / Economics and Statistics*, 2022, 536-37, pp.51-55. 10.24187/ecostat.2022.536.2088 . halshs-03959134

HAL Id: halshs-03959134

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03959134v1>

Submitted on 5 Apr 2023

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COMMENTARY

Did the COVID-19 crisis contribute to a change in the gender-based division of work within families?

Hélène Couprie*

Abstract – This commentary puts into perspective two of the articles in this issue, which analyse the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the allocation of time within families in France: one is written by Ariane Pailhé, Anne Solaz and Lionel Wilner and the other written by Hugues Champeaux and Francesca Marchetta. Both reveal that family arrangements appeared generally flexible, since time use changed significantly in the context of the crisis, leading to men becoming much more involved in household chores and parenting in particular. However, far from being unprecedented, this flexibility is compatible with a traditional division of roles according to gender. The changes observed may result from a model in which the man plays the role of a secondary worker in domestic production, who can be mobilised in the event of the unavailability of the primary worker, the woman. Decisions made by families in France are still anchored to gender norms; not only does this constitute a waste of resources, it also generates temporal inequalities that may manifest as intra-family conflicts.

JEL Codes J16. D13. I31

Keywords: Domestic production, parental time, intra-household decision-making

*Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, LEST, Aix-en-Provence (helene.COUPRIE@univ-amu.fr)

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in our economic and social lives, bringing with it a range of unexpected upheavals. “Non-essential” economic activity was stopped or relegated to working from home where possible. Of all of the upheavals experienced at this time, one has attracted particular attention: the near-universal switch to remote working blurred the line between people’s professional and private lives. The closure of schools and nurseries during the first lockdown increased the parental burden and would have encouraged men’s involvement in the home, contributing to shatter the thin and artificial boundary between these two worlds.

This interweaving of the family and professional spheres is nothing new, nor is it unknown. Family life (children, partner) generates a set of constraints and opportunities that have their share of consequences on the professional lives of those involved. Such constraints most often affect women, whose role remains largely devoted to the family, in accordance to the norms governing gender-based distribution of roles in society. Indeed, the difficult balance between family life and professional life is often raised in an effort to explain gender inequality on the labour market.

The inverse relationship, going from job characteristics to intra-family arrangements requires a study into the private sphere, whose functioning is far less observed. Family arrangements informally determine the terms of those productions said domestic (housework and looking after children). Family is a key element in the production of living standards as well as in the reproduction and transmission of human capital. Unpaid domestic production, which is poorly observed, uses time as its primary resource, a common denominator that is visible and measurable, subject to compromises and conflict between family and professional lives which are deeply intertwined.

Many European countries take action to facilitate the coordination of these two areas. In this regard, France ranks among the most generous countries (Thévenon, 2008). It has high fertility rates coupled with a high level of participation by women in the labour market. However, Goodin et al (2008) temper this finding of the effectiveness of the French welfare state: based on the concept of temporal autonomy, the authors find that gender inequality is particularly marked when it comes to discretionary time¹ (a difference of 5 hours on average in France in 1998 compared with just 1 hour in Germany).² Moreover, they claim that the socio-fiscal system does not reduce the significant temporal inequalities within families in which both partners work. Regardless of the measure adopted, the unequal distribution of domestic work between men and women in France was, and still is, the norm. It creates huge inequality within couples in cases where both partners work (Ponthieux & Schreiber, 2006). Women still take on the bulk of the domestic work, even if they are more productive than their partner and invest more of their time in paid work (Sofer & Thibout, 2015). One thing is for sure: some of the public or private means of outsourcing domestic production, which reduced intra-family temporal inequalities between men and women, became unavailable as a result of the lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 crisis.

A common approach, but different methodologies

The articles by Ariane Pailhé, Anne Solaz and Lionel Wilner (referred to as PSW below) and by Hugues Champeaux and Francesca Marchetta (referred to as CM below) in this issue both analyse the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on time use within families. Indeed, the crisis constituted an exogenous contextual change of unprecedented magnitude. Observing the behaviours adopted by families in response to this crisis provides valuable insights into intra-family arrangements and any upheaval of those arrangements. Such studies are of interest for a number of reasons. First, they provide valuable recent descriptive data on the distribution of time within families in France. They contribute to the literature measuring the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, they provide basic insights into the way in which families function.

¹ Discretionary time is time that can be spent as chosen. It is defined as the total amount of time available during a week (168 hours) minus the time needed to meet economic needs (number of working hours required in order to reach the poverty line), social needs (half of the median time spent on housework, cooking, shopping and looking after children) and biological needs (4/5^{ths} of the median time spent on personal care and sleep).

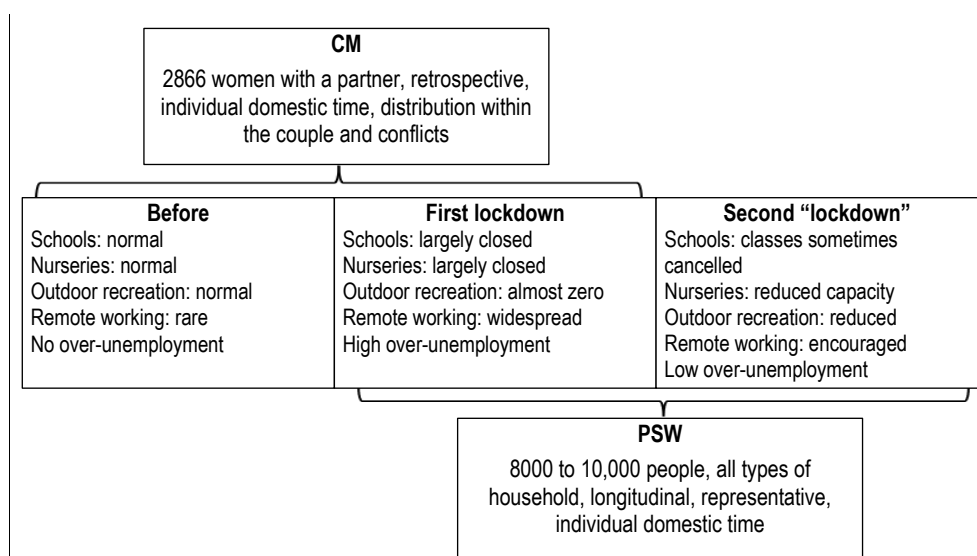
² See Goodin *et al.* (2008), Figure 3.1.

In particular, the exogeneity and the magnitude of the shock that affected the majority of households makes it possible to observe the impact of context variables the variation of which can usually only be observed by comparing different households. However, the measure of the inherent impact that variations in context between households have on behaviour is usually blurred by the fact that the context is in part chosen by the households themselves (via intra-household negotiation interactions or couple formation). Consider, for example, the impact of remote working. It is possible to compare the distribution of domestic time between households working on site and households in which one member is working from home. However, such a measure would not allow identifying the impact of remote working, since work from home can be chosen based on objectives related to time use (e.g. working from home on a Wednesday to take care of children). This issue of endogeneity does not arise here and is one of the key elements of value added of the two articles.

However, the methodology applied differs between the two articles. PSW rely on a set of cross-tabulations based on the longitudinal EpiCov survey, which is representative of the French population and was conducted during the two lockdowns in 2020. CM use multivariate regressions, isolating the specific impact of the context from the results of a one-off survey, based on a non-representative sample of women with partners. The information on the pre-lockdown situation is based on retrospective question. PSW compare the two lockdowns interpreting the second lockdown as a return to normal. In both cases, the information about time use was collected in a minimalist manner, via a question requiring an individual evaluation. PSW do not have any information regarding the partner, whereas CM have unilateral information about the intra-family sharing of tasks. This second article is better equipped to identify the lockdown impact on intra-family arrangements, while the first article is more robust, and provides an overview of the heterogeneity of the impacts for different types of family.

The main context impacts considered in the two articles are outlined below.

Context impacts and periods observed in the two articles



This diagram shows that, unlike during the first lockdown, the context effects of the second lockdown are relatively close to the pre-crisis situation; however, their magnitude differs within each sub-dimension.

What about the multi-dimensional nature of the shock? Based on recent theories regarding intra-family decisions, the authors identify different transmission channels through which the shock of the first lockdown could have changed domestic time (household tasks and parenting) and its inter and intra-household distribution. The closure of schools, nurseries and restaurants ~~is~~ would have contributed to an increase in family needs in terms of domestic production. At the same time, unemployment, a reduction in commuting time and reduced leisure opportunities outside the home created more available

time for domestic production, with potential differences between the household members. The emergence of remote working is, for its part, likely to have brought about a change in domestic production technology, allowing for an intensification of time use, which also amounts to an increase in resources in terms of available time.³ In short, the first COVID-19 lockdown gave rise to more family needs, but also more individual temporal resources. Variations in needs depend on the structure of families, whereas variations in temporal resources depend on the employment situation of individuals. There is therefore a change in the distribution of temporal resources. Family and individual effects combine in the “black box of intra-household decision-making”, leading to behavioural changes in the way in which time is used.

Impacts of lockdown on the use of time by men and women: major impacts, but no role reversal

It is no surprise that, under the double impact of increased time resources and increased needs, the first lockdown generally brought about a significant increase in the amount of time devoted to domestic chores and parenting. For domestic chores, the median impact was around +15 to +30% per person. The amount of time devoted to parenting increased in even greater proportions, but with considerably different magnitudes between the two articles.

Time spent on housework and, particularly, on parenting by men appears highly elastic depending on the context variations (increased needs, employment conditions and working hours). The temporal resources gained as a result of partial unemployment, remote working and leave were used in unprecedented ways during the lockdown to increase the amount of time devoted to parenting by men. The amount of time spent on household chores and parenting by women, which was already very high, appeared to be less sensitive to the context impacts.

In spite of this, the way in which domestic chores are distributed between men and women changed very little on the whole with the COVID-19 crisis. Women continued to take on the bulk of household chores and parenting duties (especially doing the laundry, teaching children, cleaning and cooking). The increased investment of men observed at the aggregate level comes mainly from an increased investment by men living in couples with children where the woman went out to work during lockdown. In this specific case, unprecedented falls are observed in the proportion of time spent by women on parenting, the distribution of which becomes more equal. For couples where both partners worked, the majority of whom working from home during the first lockdown, the slight reduction in the amount of time spent on domestic chores by women came exclusively from a change in the distribution of time spent on shopping (a type of time subject to changes in valuation).

Previous work based on INSEE’s *Enquêtes Emploi du Temps* (Time Use Surveys) have demonstrated that the amount of time devoted to household chores and parenting by men can be more flexible than is the case for women. This is a surprising finding given what we know about the lack of flexibility in the time they spend on paid work. Ponthieux & Schreiber (2006) observed that the time spent by men on domestic chores increases with the weight of domestic production (total housework time). It also increases when the woman is relatively more invested in paid work (higher wage or more working hours). Bloemen & Stanca (2014) estimate all the direct and cross-wage flexibilities for different joint time allocations within couples. They observe that the amount of time spent on parenting and domestic chores by men appears to react positively to women’s wages;⁴ this is not the case for time spent on domestic chores and parenting by women, which is very weakly influenced by men’s wages. Conversely, women’s use of time (paid work, domestic chores and parenting) is highly dependent on their own hourly wage, whereas men’s use of time is only weakly determined by their own wage level. In other words, it is the situation of women on the labour market that determines the way in which domestic time is distributed within families, which is what is observed by CM. This situation aligns with the idea of a gender-based distribution of roles, assigning the main role in terms of contributing to

³ The authors mention other channels, such as a change in the valuation of domestic time (shopping preferences, etc.).

⁴ A 1% increase in a woman’s hourly wage brings about a 0.5% increase in the amount of time spent on domestic chores and parenting by men.

domestic production to the woman. However, this traditional distribution of roles leaves room for exceptional and reversible adjustments, as shown by the two articles, in this case with an increase in the amount of time spent outside of paid work by men, which corresponds, in terms of functioning, to the phenomenon of an additional worker, and which would be triggered in the event that the main worker is unavailable.

This interpretation is in line with the conclusions drawn by Sofer & Thibout (2015). The absence of a reversal of roles when the woman is more heavily invested in the labour market than the man reflects the existence of deep-rooted gender norms in the division of chores within households, counteracting the logic of economic efficiency, which predict that the members of the couple specialise in terms of their productivity and comparative advantages rather than their gender (see the literature from the early research by Becker, 1965). Where both partners work, as most often in France, the loss of financial and temporal resources resulting from inefficient choices within families is coupled with inequalities in time use which are harmful for the intra-family relationships.

Intra-household conflict and violence can therefore arise during a crisis as the manifestation of inefficient and highly unequal intra-household arrangements. A temporary deviation from the social norm can also be a cause of tension and violence. It is extremely difficult and somewhat arbitrary to establish a causal link, but the correlations between lockdown, temporal inequalities and conflicts highlighted by CM undoubtedly point to possible avenues for improving the way in which families function.

The economic and societal challenges of studying the family as a source of production for the current and future well-being of the population are crucial.

The conclusions of PSW and CM clearly converge. No, the COVID-19 crisis has not helped to change the gender based distribution of domestic chores and parenting within families. The intra-family adjustments observed constitute crisis adjustments. In this sense, the family was able to make use of unusual resources, in this case men's time, to perform the share of the domestic chores that the women were unable to take on.

While it is gratifying to note that the alignment of the distribution of roles with societal gender norms did not prevent some? Some intra-family adjustments in times of crisis, those adjustments were largely inadequate. Intra-household violence has increased. Could some of these tensions have been avoided if such gender norms limiting behaviour societal did not exist?

Many of the explanations referred to in this commentary refer to studies based on old data (the last French TUS, the *Enquête Emploi du Temps* dates from 2010). Regular time use surveys, supplemented by information that allows volumes and preferences for domestic and parental production to be assessed, are essential if we are to learn more about how the family sphere functioning. This area, the functioning of which is still largely dependent on women, is a major source of inequality. Lacking visibility, its role as a shock absorber in times of crisis is worth highlighting and should be recognised.

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